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Solid Choice on Trade

President Bush's choice of Rob Portman, the Ohio congressman, to succeed Robert Zoellick as the United States trade representative was a solid if unglamorous pick for the job of prying open markets abroad -- thereby helping American workers -- while also keeping this country's markets open -- thereby helping American consumers. Mr. Portman, a moderate Republican, gets along well with the skeptical Democrats to whom he must now sell the virtues of free trade.

If he is confirmed as expected, Mr. Portman will immediately face a dogfight over the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Cafta, like its older sister, the North American Free Trade Agreement, would open up trade between the United States and its neighbors -- in this case El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Trade votes on Capitol Hill are never easy, and this one promises to recall the fight over Nafta. Labor unions, textile interests and the protectionist sugar industry are lined up in opposition. Labor unions are right to complain that Cafta should mandate stricter labor standards in Central America. But that is not enough reason to kill the agreement.

Cafta itself is not likely to lift Central America into the 21st century. But it might be enough to lift the five countries into the 20th century. The agreement would encourage growth in the region's textile and apparel industries -- a huge helping hand at a time when China is sucking up textile manufacturing jobs. The trade pact would also help American textile companies in the South, an industry that is surely dying. We do not argue that it be protected indefinitely, but time is needed to retrain younger workers and for older workers who don't want to retrain to retire with their jobs intact.

Cafta can delay the job exodus to China for a few more years. Here is how: The pact would give the five countries duty-free access to the American market if they use American material, like yarn. So if Guatemala ships more blue jeans to America, factories in Guatemala would need to buy more of our yarn. That helps workers in both countries.

If Mr. Portman can get Cafta through Congress, it would be a worthy step for an administration that is seen as increasingly isolationist.